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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the relationships between the employment statuses of African American husbands and wives, and their marital happiness. Data for 234 husbands and 292 wives were obtained from the 1980-86 General Social Surveys. The data corroborated earlier findings that African American husbands indicated greater marital happiness than did wives. The findings coincide with findings for whites, and support the general idea that husbands benefit more from marriage than wives. Full- time employment for husbands was associated with intermediate levels of happiness for both spouses. The work status for husbands that was associated with the lowest marital happiness for both husbands and wives was unemployment. Any status other than unemployed was a preferable status for husbands. If the husband perceived himself, or was perceived by his wife, to be productively occupied, marital happiness appeared to be enhanced. Households in which wives worked full-time did not have the highest levels of marital happiness. Wives who worked full-time evidenced the lowest levels of marital happiness, and husbands whose wives worked full time showed the second lowest level of marital happiness. (LLL)

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WORK AND MARITAL HAPPINESS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationships between the employment statuses of African American husbands and wives and their marital happiness. Data for 234 husbands and 292 wives were obtained from the 1980-86 General Social Surveys. Husbands show higher average levels of marital happiness than do wives. Husbands who are unemployed show the lowest levels of marital happiness, as do the wives of unemployed husbands. Wives who are employed full time are the least happy with their marriages. Husbands whose wives are employed part time are happiest with their marriages. Unemployment of husbands may be seen by both spouses as inadequate role performance. Full time work by wives may involve overload and role conflict.

Employment is crucial for family functioning. Obtaining adequate financial resources is a prime requisite for maintaining the family as an intact unit. The inability of many African American men to adequately support a family has been considered one of the most important factors in family stress and breakup. Husband's employment is believed vital to self-esteem and marital relations (Scanzoni, 1977; Staples, 1981; Taylor, 1977; Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, and Lewis, 1990).

More controversial in American society is the employment of wives. Among whites, earlier writers saw paid employment as possibly detrimental to family relations. More recently, wives' employment has become the norm, and thorough reviews of the literature by Smith (1985) and Spitze (1988) have concluded that wives' employment has little effect on the marital adjustment of either spouse. However, the unique conditions faced by black family members both in the past and today may make findings for white spouses inapplicable for blacks (Rexroat, 1990; Thomas, 1990).

African American wives have a long tradition of paid outside employment (Huber and Spitze, 1981; Taylor et al., 1990). While this enhances family economic functioning and may lead to more egalitarian sex roles, it inevitably produces conflict for the woman juggling the employee, wife, and often, mother, roles. Black women still perform the majority of household work, and are more likely to feel overworked (Broman, 1988; Taylor et al., 1990). Lessened marital happiness for both spouses may result

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from the wife's overload.

The greatest proportion of prior study on black families has focused on low-income and mother/child only families (Thomas, 1990). In addition, the family roles of black men have been neglected (Taylor et al., 1990). The research detailed here is designed to provide information on an all-too-often neglected area: The marital happiness of African Americans from all economic strata. Of particular interest is the relationship of employment to marital happiness. Studied is the employment status of the respondent as related to his or her marital happiness. Also of interest is employment status of the respondent's spouse as it relates to the respondent's marital happiness.

METHOD

Data used for this study are from the General Social Surveys (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). Face-to-face interviews are conducted annually with approximately 1500 adults nationwide (Davis and Smith, 1986). GSS data from 1980 to 1986 are used here, with prior data excluded to minimize longitudinal change. For this study a total of 526 valid cases were obtained from the pooled samples, of whom 234 were black husbands, and 292 black wives, all residing with their spouses. (As only one person per household was interviewed, no couples are included.)

The dependent variable is marital happiness. The GSS asks married respondents: "taking all things together, how would you

describe your marriage? Would you say that your marriage is 'very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?'" (Davis and Smith, 1986: 172). For this analysis "very happy" is coded 3, "pretty happy" 2, and "not too happy" 1.

Employment status is given in five categories. For both husbands and wives, "full time," "part time," and "retired, school, and other" categories are used. For husbands, "unemployed" is also a category, as is "keeping house" for wives. (Almost no men indicated they were "keeping house," and very few women indicated that they were "unemployed.")

To further assess the relationship of employment to marital happiness, the spouse's employment status also is researched. The same five categories of employment status are used here as are used for respondents'.

Other variables included in the GSS that may have an impact on marital happiness and also may be related to employment status include respondent's age, subjective health, education, and religiosity, as measured by frequency of church attendance. Number of minor children at home also is likely to be related to both marital happiness and employment status. Therefore, multivariate analysis also is used which includes these potentially confounding variables. (Income is not included as it is so highly related to employment status as to introduce the problem of multicollinearity.)

For bivariate relationships, analysis of variance is used. The multivariate analysis uses linear regression with pairwise

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deletion of missing variables. The statistical program is SPSS-X. The GSS sampling procedure and pooling of samples from different years makes possible the overstatement of actual significance levels (Glenn and McLanahan, 1981; Kish, 1965).

HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1. Prior research has indicated that black husbands evidence higher levels of marital happiness than do their wives (Thomas, 1990; Zollar and Williams, 1987). It is expected that this also will be evidenced in this national sample.

Hypothesis 2. We expect both husbands and wives to have higher marital happiness scores when the husband is employed full time, as he is then most likely to be fulfilling the provider role.

Hypothesis 3. Due to the historical and contemporary necessity for many black women to work, and the greater acceptance of black men than white to endorse the views that women should be employed (Taylor et al., 1990), we hypothesize that both husbands and wives will be happier with their marriages if the wife is employed full time.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows that both husbands and wives expressed happiness with their marriages. The modal response is "very happy,"

followed by "pretty happy." Far fewer spouses answered "not too happy." Husbands, on the average, showed higher levels of marital happiness.

TABLE 1

Table 2 shows the bivariate relationship between respondent's work status and marital happiness level. For husbands, those who work part time or who are "retired, in school or other" are most satisfied. Intermediate are those working full time, while least happy are those unemployed. For wives, those working full time are the least satisfied with their marriages, while those who are "retired, in school, or other" are the most satisfied. Next most satisfied are those keeping house, with those working part time even less satisfied. Thus, for this sample, working wives, whether the work is full or part time, are less satisfied. However, the differences may not be generalizable, as they are not statistically significant.

TABLE 2

Table 3 shows respondents' marital happiness levels as they relate to their spouses' employment statuses. Husbands are happiest with their marriages when their wives work part time. Intermediate levels of happiness are indicated when their wives work full time or "keep house." Lowest happiness levels are found when their wives are "retired, in school, or other." The difference is statistically significant ($p < .01$). For wives, in contrast, highest marital happiness levels exist for those whose

husbands are in the "retired, in school, or other" category. Next highest levels are found for those whose husbands are employed full time, with those whose husbands are employed part time not far behind. As might be expected lowest in marital happiness are wives whose husbands are unemployed.

TABLE 3

Table 4 shows the results of the multiple regression, with the control variables added. Dummy variables were created for respondent's employment status and respondent's spouse's employment status, with working full time being used as the suppressed comparison category for both.

TABLE 4

For husbands, being "retired, in school, or other" is associated with a significantly higher level of marital happiness than being employed full time. Having a spouse employed only part time rather than full time also is related to greater happiness, but having a wife "retired, in school, or other" is associated with lower happiness. Thus, husbands appear happier with their marriages when they are retired, etc., rather than working full time, but are less happy when their wives are in that employment category. Additionally, control variables significantly related to marital happiness are respondent's health and frequency of church attendance. Not significantly related are the number of minor children at home, respondent being unemployed or

working part time, having a spouse who keeps house, or respondent's level of education or age.

For wives, different patterns are evident. Wives who "keep house" are significantly happier than those who work full time ($p < .01$). Wives whose husbands are unemployed are significantly less happy. Other variables significantly related to marital happiness for these wives are better health, higher levels of education, and being older. Not significant are number of minor children at home, frequency of church attendance, working part time, or being retired, or having a spouse work part time or being retired.

DISCUSSION

The data presented in this study corroborate earlier findings that African American husbands on average indicate greater marital happiness than do wives (Hypothesis 1). This coincides with many findings for whites, also, and supports the general idea that husbands benefit more from marriage than do wives. However, our expectation that marital happiness will be higher for both spouses if the husband is employed full time is not fulfilled (Hypothesis 2). Instead, the husband being employed full time is associated with intermediate levels of happiness for both spouses. The work status for husbands that is associated with the lowest marital happiness for both husbands and wives, however, is being unemployed. Complete lack of work appears to be the crucial situation, rather than full time employment. Any status other than "unemployed," whether it be part time employed,

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full time employed, or "retired, in school, or other" is a preferable status for husbands. If the husband perceives himself, or is perceived by his wife, to be productively occupied, marital happiness appears to be enhanced. The critical variable may involve status and esteem, rather than the instrumental provision of income to the household. However, this finding must be viewed as tentative, as some of the differences found do not reach statistical significance.

Households in which wives work full time do not have the highest levels of marital happiness (Hypothesis 3). In fact, wives who work full time evidence the lowest levels of marital happiness, and husbands whose wives work full time show the second lowest level of marital happiness. It may be that full time work for wives is associated with role conflict that overpowers the instrumental resource provision of income received from full time employment. Thus, the "overload" thesis at least indirectly receives support from this study.

Employment does appear to be associated with marital happiness for African Americans. However, the relationships are not necessarily as were originally hypothesized. Husband's unemployment may hamper both his and wives' marital happiness, while wives' full time employment may be harmful to both her and her husband's marital happiness. Further research with larger samples is needed to more thoroughly explore this important area of African American family life.

TABLE 1. MARITAL HAPPINESS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

Q: "Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage?"

		Husbands		Wives	
Response	Score[1]	N	%	N	%
Very happy	3	124	53.5	141	49.6
Pretty happy	2	97	41.8	117	41.2
Not too happy	1	11	4.7	26	9.2
Total		232	100.0	284	100.0
		$\bar{x}$ = 2.49		$\bar{x}$ = 2.40	

Sex difference: t = 1.50, p = .07

Note: [1]Reversed from NORC codebook.

TABLE 2. RESPONDENT'S WORK STATUS AND MARITAL HAPPINESS

	Husbands			Wives		
	N	$\bar{x}$	p	N	$\bar{x}$	p
Respondent's work status	232	2.49	NS	284	2.41	NS
full time	159	2.46		120	2.35	
part time	13	2.62		39	2.41	
unemployed	13	2.23		-	-	
keeping house	-	-		103	2.47	
retired, school, other	47	2.62		22	2.55	

TABLE 3. RESPONDENT'S SPOUSE'S WORK STATUS AND RESPONDENT'S MARITAL HAPPINESS

	Husbands			Wives		
	N	$\bar{x}$	p	N	$\bar{x}$	p
Spouse's work status	231	2.49	.01	274	2.41	NS
full time	111	2.48		202	2.41	
part time	23	2.78		16	2.31	
unemployed	-	-		12	2.08	
keeping house	79	2.49		-	-	
retired, school, other	18	2.17		44	2.57	

TABLE 4. WORK AND MARITAL HAPPINESS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HUSBANDS AND WIVES: MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

	Husbands				Wives			
Variable	B	BETA	T	p[a]	B	BETA	T	p[a]
No. children home	.016	.039	.48	NS	-.018	-.041	-0.52	NS
R unemployed	-.127	-.050	-0.66	NS	-	-	-	-
R's health	.085	.139	1.58	.06	.150	.181	2.30	.01
Church attendance	.037	.157	2.09	.02	.005	.021	0.28	NS
R works part-time	.158	.062	0.79	NS	.148	.077	1.01	NS
Sp. works part-time	.273	.139	1.77	.04	-.168	-.060	-0.82	NS
Spouse retired, etc.[b]	-.349	-.159	-2.03	.02	.009	.005	0.06	NS
Sp. keeps house	.001	.001	0.02	NS	-	-	-	-
R's education	.004	.026	0.31	NS	.028	.130	1.55	.06
R retired, etc.[b]	.255	.175	1.80	.04	.179	.076	0.95	NS
R's age	.001	.020	0.20	NS	.007	.177	1.81	.04
Spouse unemployed	-	-	-	-	-.425	-.132	-1.80	.04
R keeps house	-	-	-	-	.258	.190	2.22	.01
Constant[c]	1.934	F = 1.86		.05	1.226	F = 1.82		.05

Notes: [a]Probability of T is with direction predicted.
[b]Retired, in-school, other.
[c]Includes respondents working full-time and spouses working full-time.

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